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RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0029
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RHMFISS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC
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RHMFISS/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CHIANG MAI 000027

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 2/15/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [SNAR](#) [BM](#) [TH](#)
SUBJECT: KNU SECRETARY GENERAL ASSASSINATED

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CLASSIFIED BY: Alex Barrasso, Chief, Pol/Econ, CG Chiang Mai.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Though the assassination of Karen National Union
Secretary General Mahn Sha is most likely the result of

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infighting among Karen groups, we cannot discount entirely the
possible involvement of elements of the Burmese military and
perhaps local Thai officials. The Thai police are
investigating, and they believe they can solve the case quickly.
There is no evidence to suggest that other Burmese exiles'
lives are at risk as a result of Mahn Sha's murder, although
some have expressed concern for their safety. The assassination
is unlikely to directly affect refugee flows into Thailand. End
Summary.

KNU Leader Assassinated

¶2. (SBU) Mahn Sha, the Secretary General of the Karen National
Union (KNU), was killed in northern Thailand on February 14.
(Note: The KNU has waged low-level military conflict against the
Burmese regime for over 40 years, but poses no real threat to
it. The group currently limits its actions to protecting
civilians in Karen State from the Burma Army's abuses, and
attacking small groups of Burma Army soldiers when it can.)
Though accounts from Burmese exile groups, the media, and local
Thai officials differ slightly, we can conclude that sometime

between 4:00 and 5:00 pm local time on February 14, three men drove to Mahn Sha's house in the border town of Mae Sot, Tak Province, in a pickup truck. Two got out of the vehicle, greeted him in Karen and shot him, killing him instantly, before fleeing. The truck had Thai license plates, though local officials in Mae Sot believe they were fraudulent. In the wake of the murder, some Burmese exile groups have expressed concern for the personal safety of their members, claiming that their names are on a Burmese regime "hit list."

13. (C) Comment: Though the regime stands to benefit by silencing the exile community, we have no evidence of any plot on its part to kill Mahn Sha or any other exiles. KNU contacts told us there were always purported "hit lists" floating around, and that Mahn Sha was always near the top. We note that to date, National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB - an umbrella organization of Burmese exile groups) Secretary General Maung Maung is the only exile figure to express imminent concern for his safety, but he did so indirectly through contacts in the U.S., rather than reaching out directly to U.S. Mission Thailand. Furthermore, a close associate of Maung Maung told post yesterday that if Mahn Sha's death was the result of internal squabbles among the Karen, then "we are alright". We only have to worry, he said, if his murder was ordered by the regime. End Comment.

14. (C) KNU contacts told us on February 15 that they believe the assassination was carried out by rival Karen groups: the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA - a KNU splinter group that now sides with the regime), in conjunction with the KNU Peace Council (KPC - another KNU splinter group with close ties to the regime). This view is shared by other observers here. Respected Burmese exile Aung Naing Oo, who lectures at Chiang Mai University, told the press the killing was likely the result of infighting among rival Karen groups. A contact with the Free Burma Rangers, a faith-based group that provides humanitarian relief to Karen and other ethnic groups inside Burma, said the murder was more likely a result of internal Karen factional violence than of action by the Burmese regime. (Note: One late-breaking news report claims that DKBA forces

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attacked the KNU on Thai territory. In response to our queries, both KNU and Thai intelligence contacts denied the report. We will follow up and report as appropriate.)

15. (C) A contact at the Thai National Intelligence Agency (NIA) office in Mae Sot, citing communications intercepted a few days ago between General Htay Maung of the KPC and Lieutenant Colonel Min Chit Oo of Burma's Office of Military Affairs Security, told us he believed the Burmese Government likely played a role in the assassination. Yet he asserted that the driving force behind the killing was KNU-KPC infighting, not the regime.

Thai Complicity?

16. (C) In a February 14 meeting with us that coincidentally took place while the assassination was being carried out, Pastor Timothy Laklem of the KPC lashed out at Mahn Sha and Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA - the military wing of the KNU) Seventh Brigade Commander Johnny, blaming them for the January 29 assassination of KPC General Ler Mu in Karen State. He called the KNU terrorists, and accused them of playing dirty politics. He also alleged that the KNU was involved in drug trafficking and in the illegal timber trade through Burmese regime crony Tay Za. (Comment: While we cannot prove these allegations, such illegal activities are often suspected of being the sustenance of armed groups in Burma's ethnic states and along its borders.) Pastor Timothy went on to say that KPC General Htay Maung was initially considering retaliating by attacking the Mae La Refugee Camp in Thailand, but was persuaded by the Pastor that Mahn Sha and Johnny were responsible for Ler Mu's death, not anyone from the Camp. (Note: We saw at least one media report earlier this week alleging that there were

plans to attack the Camp, but no one has reported anything out of the ordinary there since then.)

¶7. (C) Pastor Timothy also alleged that elements of the Thai Third Army assisted the KNU in the assassination of General Ler Mu, and that the KNU carries out its drug and timber trade with the collaboration of some local Thai officials. (Comment: Pastor Timothy failed to present evidence to support these allegations.) Separately, a contact in Royal Thai Army intelligence told us he could not discount the involvement of some local Thai officials in Mahn Sha's death, citing the fact that the attack was carried out in broad daylight rather than after dark. He also stated that yesterday was the first time someone at Mahn Sha's level (General Secretary) had ever been attacked on Thai soil. The same contact said that Thai police were investigating Mahn Sha's death, and that he believed they would have suspects in custody relatively soon, particularly if no local Thai officials were involved in carrying out the assassination. KNU contacts confirmed that Thai police were investigating Mahn Sha's murder, and opined that the police and military already have some leads. The same KNU contacts did not reveal any plans to carry out attacks in retaliation for Mahn Sha's death.

Comment

¶8. (C) Though we cannot dismiss allegations of non-Karen involvement in these two assassinations and the KNU's alleged illegal activities, the Thai-Burma border is very porous, and crossing it away from official checkpoints does not require assistance from Thai authorities. So far, the preponderance of the evidence indicates that Mahn Sha's assassination was the work of the KPC and DKBA, though it appears elements of the

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Burmese military were aware of the plot. Regardless of who killed him and why, Mahn Sha was a strong advocate for the Karen, and will be missed by the vast majority of them. Since Mahn Sha's death is likely due to infighting between Karen groups rather than a plan laid by the Burmese regime to eliminate a senior Karen leader, we do not believe this incident in and of itself will lead to increased refugee flows into Thailand. We will continue to monitor the situation closely, and to coordinate with Embassies Rangoon and Bangkok.

¶9. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassies Bangkok and Rangoon.
MORROW